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ABSTRACT

Hiring qualified reading professionals is a complex process involving a variety of considerations. Organizing a language arts advisory committee, determining the faculty's perceptions, interviewing and observing the best candidates, and working toward retaining the new appointees are feasible considerations of the selection process. Probably, the most important ingredient in the guidelines offered in this document is the involvement of teachers in every phase of the process. Although these approaches are time-consuming, the benefits are noteworthy, because appointing the best reading educators not only can improve language arts instruction but also can enhance communications across the curriculum. (Twelve references and a checklist for the recruitment of qualified reading professionals are attached.) (RS)

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Guidelines for Hiring Qualified Reading Professionals

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Recently, schools in the United States have experienced a variety of changes, including an increase in teacher retirements, student enrollments, and reform initiatives. These trends have created a need for hiring about two million new teachers during this decade. Selecting talented educators, however, is not an easy task, and school systems may be complicating matters by hindering the selection and retention of the best teachers (Wise, Darling-Hammond, & Berry 1987a, 1987b, 1988).

This problem could be further complicated when hiring reading personnel, since these professionals are expected to serve a diversity of roles. For example, a building reading teacher may be responsible for teaching remedial reading-writing classes, attending grade-level and department meetings, presenting model lessons in content-area classrooms, working cooperatively with teachers to order instructional materials, maintaining curricular congruence between the learning center and the classroom, and guiding the overall language arts program. Fortunately, the Professional Standards and Ethics Committee (1986) of the International Reading Association presents a number of competencies that can support the appointment of qualified reading educators. According to the Committee, reading personnel may function in varied capacities, including diagnostic-remedial specialists, developmental reading-study skills specialists, reading consultant/reading resource teacher, reading coordinator/supervisor, and reading professor. The Committee suggests knowledge areas and competencies for reading

professionals, and they include linguistic and cognitive bases for reading, comprehension, word identification and vocabulary, appreciation and enjoyment, diagnostic teaching, and continuing program maintenance planning and improvement.

Although these standards represent a good beginning for hiring reading educators, they do not guarantee the selection of the best candidates. Other criteria also should be considered by school administrators and classroom teachers who work cooperatively to select the "right" candidates for the "right" schools. The following guidelines represent such cooperation as caring colleagues attempt to appoint qualified reading professionals.

Guideline #1: Form a language arts advisory committee. Since the hiring process is complex, more than one individual should be involved in the selection of candidates. This approach lessens the incidence of political nepotism and narrowmindedness because a variety of perspectives are considered. A helpful source is a language arts advisory committee, consisting of classroom teachers, library media specialists, administrators, parents, and (sometimes) students. The committee's first task is to discuss the need for the new reading teacher in the context of the school system's philosophy and related goals. This initial attempt at matching a potential reading teacher with the school's mission is vital, for it increases the chances of retaining the new teacher. If this process is overlooked, a serious conflict could develop between the school's real needs and the new teacher's perception of these

needs.

To prevent such a conflict, the committee can meet with the faculty to review the school system's philosophy and goals and to discuss their relationship to the individual school and prospective teacher. Thus, faculty members have an opportunity to modify the school's mission, to indicate additional concerns that affect the incoming reading teacher, and to demonstrate a sense of ownership in the hiring process. With this foundation established, members of the language arts advisory committee now have a better sense of direction as they pursue a new reading educator.

Guideline #2: Survey the faculty to further determine their perceptions concerning the school's mission and its link to the new reading educator. Insights gained from the faculty meeting can help the committee develop a survey concerning the school system's philosophy and goals and their potential impact on the roles and responsibilities of the new teacher. The purpose of the survey is to objectify the staff's perceptions so that the committee is focused better during the selection process. Thus, comments made during the faculty meeting may reveal a need for extending the philosophy and goals to include a whole language thrust. Similarly, the faculty may have suggested that the building reading teacher to be appointed should focus on preventing reading difficulties and on supporting lifetime literacy efforts.

With this information, the committee develops a survey reflecting not only these concerns but also other concerns that

seem appropriate. Usually, the instrument consists of items that represent pertinent areas, such as "assists content-area teachers to improve reading-writing instruction in their classes," "implements specific staff development programs," "involves parents as partners in their children's education," and "supports the lifetime reading-writing habit." In addition, a Likert-type scale can be applied to the survey's items, and a section for open-ended responses may be included also. This approach quantifies the staff's attitudes about the school system's original and revised philosophy and goals. It also objectifies the faculty's perceptions of the new position to be filled and its related roles and responsibilities. After field-testing the instrument, the committee administers it to the staff. Then, the results are tabulated and presented at a faculty meeting, where attempts are made to analyze the feedback and to establish priorities. Finally, the committee writes a job description that reflects the priorities. Although this process is extensive and time-consuming, it demonstrates a genuine commitment to the faculty's continuous involvement in hiring a new and valued colleague.

Guideline #3: Interview the best candidates. Priorities established from the staff's feedback provide the language arts advisory committee with a sense of direction when interviewing prospective reading teachers. After reviewing resumes that suggest suitable graduate work and professional experience, the committee interviews individuals whose backgrounds are potentially matched

with the school's needs. Effective interviews are both cordial and focused; that is, they do not resemble oral defenses of dissertations, but they do represent genuine attempts to hire individuals who are caring, dedicated, and knowledgeable. Applicants should be able to describe feasible strategies for meeting a school's needs, and these strategies should reflect short-term and long-term goals (Sanacore, 1979).

For example, if one of the school's needs is to provide better classroom organization for reading-writing, the candidates are expected to describe how they would support teachers in their efforts to incorporate intra-class grouping procedures. Such procedures may include shared reading, literature circles, strategy groups, individual approaches, and whole class activities (Sanacore, 1992). Similarly, if a school's focus is on creating a language arts program for gifted and talented students, the prospective reading educator should describe a flexible sequence of events concerning selection criteria, challenging expectations, curriculum development, classroom strategies, and evaluative considerations.

Since many schools throughout the United States are strengthening partnerships with parents, desirable candidates demonstrate an awareness of different types of parental involvement as well as varied roles of parents, such as home tutor, co-learner, audience, program supporter, advocate, and decision-maker (Epstein, 1988). In addition, presenting strategies related to essential elements of effective parent involvement programs increases the

prospective reading teachers' credibility. These elements include (1) writing policies that justify the importance of parents as partners and that provide a structure for program activities; (2) stressing administrative support by designating funds in the budget, making available material/product resources to complement program activities, and selecting individuals to carry out activities; (3) providing training for parents and staff; (4) emphasizing the partnership approach to enable the staff and parents to have a sense of ownership through such activities as defining roles, setting goals, and assessing outcomes; (5) developing a two-way communication system so that parents and staff feel comfortable sharing ideas and voicing concerns; (6) networking with other partnership programs to share technical expertise, resources, and information; and (7) employing evaluative strategies at key stages and at the end of a phase (Williams & Chavkin, 1989). In addition to these elements, strong candidates for reading positions are aware of organizations/resources that support parental involvement in schools; these include the Cornell University Family Matters Project (Ithaca, NY), the National Coalition of Parent Involvement in Education (Alexandria, VA), and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (Washington, DC).

Although prospective reading professionals should be excellently prepared in their specialty and in allied areas, Rauch (1969) also believes they should possess those priceless intangibles that are difficult to measure objectively. Among these intangibles are insight, understanding, and a genuine love of

children. Complementing these desirable attributes are Highet's (1950) key characteristics of effective teachers: clarity, patience, and responsibility. Since interviews, by themselves, do not always reveal candidates' professional and personal attributes, observations of the candidates can provide more insight about their unique abilities.

Guideline #4: Observe the best candidates. One of the most important aspects of the hiring process is to visit the school systems in which the candidates are employed and to observe their accomplishments firsthand (Sanacore & Rauch, 1990). If the candidates are currently serving as building reading/resource teachers, then members of the language arts advisory committee may randomly select colleagues and students to discuss the candidates' efforts in dealing with people, curricula, teaching, staff development, and other pertinent areas. The committee also has the opportunity to ask probing questions that elicit valuable information about candidates' unique abilities (e.g., insight, understanding, genuine love of children, clarity, patience, responsibility, and personal and professional reading habits). In addition, the committee should observe specific outcomes associated with the candidates' efforts (especially teaching performance) to improve the language arts context.

Another concern of the committee is likely to be demographic trends and their impact on students (Sanacore, 1989). Specifically, have the candidates' accomplishments reflected

sensitivity to the problems and needs of today's youth? During the past several decades, major trends have taken place which have affected the way children are reared. These trends include a higher divorce rate, more single-parent households, and a greater number of career-oriented parents. Thus, more latch-key children leave school each afternoon and enter homes with little or no adult supervision. Typically, these young people watch too much television, spend too much time on the telephone, and engage in other personal activities that displace or negate the school's efforts. Prospective reading professionals can show sensitivity to the changing home environment by having implemented in their schools a variety of programs that narrow, rather than widen, potential literacy gaps in students' lives. For example, candidates who have used substantial school time for pleasurable, independent reading have demonstrated an awareness that this major literacy event probably is receiving inadequate support at home and thus needs additional reinforcement in school. A strong candidate for a reading position manifests an acute awareness of and response to today's demography.

These effective recruitment techniques focus on experienced teachers serving vital roles on the language arts advisory committee, especially interviewing candidates and observing their accomplishments in their own setting. According to Wise, Darling-Hammond, and Berry (1988, p.84):

> ...school districts should maximize the participation of experienced teachers in all phases of the selection process.

Significant teacher input permits a more thorough scrutiny of a candidate's teaching philosophy and teaching competence. Teacher input also increases the validity of the selection process since local practitioners understand fully the demands and responsibilities associated with a particular vacancy. Finally, involving veteran teachers in selection heightens the investment they feel in the success of their new colleagues, thus decreasing the isolation of, and increasing the collegial supports available to, the new teacher.

These considerations are certainly more reliable than some of the traditional recruitment techniques which rely too much on candidates' college transcripts, haphazard interviews, and personal letters of reference.

Guideline #5: Develop strategies for retaining newly appointed reading professionals. After selecting the best candidates, the committee sends them to the central office and board of education for the final round of interviews. The next major task is to retain the newly hired individuals. Initially, they should be placed in vacancies that are well-matched with their skills, interests, experiences, and qualifications. This type of congruence is especially beneficial when it is complemented by a support system that assists the individuals in their initial years with the school system (Wise, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 1988). Regrettably, when educators are appointed, they usually are sent to problematic schools because the seniority policy allows the most

senior professionals to work in the schools of their choice. This policy often translates into the most experienced educators choosing to work in the least problematic schools, thus forcing the newly hired individuals to function in environments for which they are not well-prepared. Obviously, if a major goal in hiring the best educators is to retain them, then the current seniority policy must be revised; otherwise the time-consuming selection process will result in failure.

One way of revising the current policy is to offer incentives to veteran teachers so that they remain in difficult schools. In addition, schools can support new professionals by providing them with mentors during their early years of service (Wise, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 1988). For example, a master reading teacher from one school could be granted release time to work with newly appointed reading teachers. This approach acclimates new appointees (both novice and experienced) to the school setting and also provides them with experiences that will equip them for a future transfer to problematic schools.

Summary

Hiring qualified reading professionals is a complex process involving a variety of considerations. The strategies suggested here do not guarantee the selection of the best candidates, but they do provide a reasonable sense of direction. Organizing a language arts advisory committee, determining the faculty's perceptions, interviewing and observing the best candidates, and

working toward retaining the new appointees are feasible considerations of the selection process. Probably, the most important ingredient in these guidelines is the involvement of teachers in every phase of the process. Teachers are more likely to work cooperatively with new reading professionals if they feel their opinions were genuinely valued during recruitment of the individuals. Although these approaches are time-consuming, the benefits are noteworthy because appointing the best reading educators not only can improve language arts instruction but also can enhance communications across the curriculum.

A Checklist for the Recruitment of Qualified Reading Professionals

1. When forming a language arts advisory committee, remember to
   - A. Include classroom teachers, librarians, administrators, parents, and (sometimes) students
   - B. Relate the new reading position to the school system's philosophy and goals
   - C. Meet with the faculty to determine their perceptions

2. When surveying the faculty, remember to
   - A. Develop an instrument that reflects feedback from the faculty meeting as well as concerns of the committee
   - B. Apply a Likert-type scale to the survey's items
   - C. Include a section for open-ended responses
   - D. Field-test the instrument before administering it to the entire faculty
   - E. Tabulate the results after administering the survey, and present them at a faculty meeting
   - F. Analyze the feedback and establish priorities
   - G. Write a job description that reflects the priorities

3. When interviewing candidates, remember to
   - A. Emphasize the priorities established from the staff's feedback
   - B. Review resumes
   - C. Interview individuals whose backgrounds are potentially matched with the school's needs
   - D. Expect candidates to describe realistic strategies for meeting the school's needs
   - E. Expect candidates to reveal personal characteristics, such as insight, understanding, genuine love of children, clarity, patience, responsibility, and personal and professional reading habits

4. When observing candidates, remember to

   A. Select the candidates' colleagues and students on a random basis to discuss the candidates' efforts in dealing with people, curricula, teaching, staff development, etc.

   B. Ask probing questions that elicit valuable information about the candidates' personal characteristics (insight, understanding, etc.)

   C. Observe specific outcomes associated with the candidates' efforts to improve language arts

5. When attempting to retain newly appointed reading professionals, remember to

   A. Place the professionals in vacancies that are well-matched with their backgrounds

   B. Revise the seniority policy so that veteran teachers remain in difficult schools

   C. Acclimate new appointees (both novice and experienced) by providing them with a mentor

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